

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Alpine Community Defense Environmental Assessment (EA)

**USDA Forest Service
Descanso Ranger District, Cleveland National Forest
San Diego County, California**

1. Background

As described in the Alpine Community Defense EA in greater detail, the Alpine Community Defense hazardous fuels treatment project is being designed with two objectives in mind. The first will be to reduce the risk and impact of catastrophic wildfire to the communities of Alpine, Viejas Indian Reservation, and Carveacre. The second will be to limit fires that start on private land and move onto Forest lands. Project area locations and associated treatments will be designed to meet Land Management Plan (LMP) goals and standards through employing program strategies and tactics found in Appendix B of Part 2 (USDA Forest Service, 2005).

The purpose of this project is to reduce the risks to life, property, and resource values from wildland fire while improving fire suppression abilities and fire fighter safety around the communities near and within Alpine, Viejas Indian Reservation and Carveacre. Alpine is the largest, most populated city within the Descanso Ranger District of the Cleveland National Forest. It is among the Descanso Ranger District's highest priorities for community protection from wildfire. Viejas Indian Reservation and surrounding communities to the east of Alpine have been threatened repeatedly by wildfire. In early 2000's, the Viejas Band of the Kumeyaay Indians, as part of the Tribal Forest Protection Act, completed a fuelbreak on non-NFS lands, this project proposes to complete the portion of the project on NFS lands creating defensible space to residents south of the reservation. Carveacre is a rural extension of greater Alpine, and is surrounded by National Forest lands. Carveacre has only one maintained access and egress point for the entire community. The best chance of preventing loss of life and property is to treat and maintain the fuels around the entire community so residents can safely shelter in place if escape is not an option in the event of a large wildfire. Life, property, and resource values could be threatened by a future wildfire event if no action is taken.

In its current state, the proposed project area will support a high-intensity wildfire. In 2003, the Cedar Fire burned through a majority of the project area. In 2001, the Viejas Fire burned the southern Alpine block of the proposed project area. These fires were detrimental to improvements and infrastructure within and adjacent to NFS lands. They were high-intensity wildfires that burned in areas where fuels had not been managed. The opportunity now exists to be proactive and treat fuels adjacent to high value resources that burned in the Cedar and Viejas fires before they reach their pre-fire condition. This project will provide the opportunity to

maintain the treatments around the community of Carveacre and create strategic fuelbreaks along the Anderson Truck Trail and in eastern Alpine south of the Viejas Indian Reservation.

2. Decision and Rationale

Based upon the analysis and evaluation documented in the Alpine Community Defense EA and associated record, comments received from interested parties, and direction from the Cleveland National Forest LMP, I have decided to implement the Modified Alternative 3 (Preferred Alternative) in its entirety. The Preferred Alternative authorizes the implementation of hazardous fuels treatments on up to 299 acres of Cleveland National Forest lands including manual, mechanical, chemical, and prescribed fire treatment methods or any combination there in. Additionally, the Preferred Alternative will authorize local fire safe councils to expend federal funds for treating hazardous fuels on up to 90 acres of adjacent private lands in cooperation with local landowners and state resource agencies. See detailed treatment matrix and project location maps (*Table 1, Figure 1 -3*).

Table 1. Detailed Treatment Index

Alternative	Unit ID	Location	Land Ownership	Vegetation Type	New or Existing Fuelbreak	Mechanical Treatment Type	Herbicide Authorized	Prescribed Fire*	Targeted Grazing	Maintenance Required**	Acres
3M	1	Anderson Truck Trail	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile	Y	Y	Y	Y	13
3M	2	Anderson Truck Trail	NON-FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile OR Masticate	N	N	N	Y	3
3M	3	Anderson Truck Trail	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile OR Masticate	Y	Y	Y	Y	25
3M	4	Anderson Truck Trail	NON-FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile/Chip OR Masticate	N	N	N	Y	12
3M	5	Anderson Truck Trail	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile OR Masticate	N	Y	Y	Y	21
3M	6A	Anderson Truck Trail	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile	Y	Y	Y	Y	12
3M	7	Viejas Creek	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile OR Masticate	Y	Y	Y	Y	10
3M	8	Viejas Creek	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile OR Masticate	Y	Y	Y	Y	22
3M	9B	Viejas Creek	NON-FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile/Chip OR Masticate	N	N	N	Y	51
3M	10	Carveacre	NON-FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile/Chip OR Masticate	N	N	N	Y	10
3M	11	Carveacre	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile/Chip OR Masticate	Y	Y	Y	Y	3
3M	12	Carveacre	NON-FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile/Chip OR Masticate	N	N	N	Y	14
3M	13	Carveacre	FS	Chaparral	New	Hand Cut & Pile OR Masticate	Y	Y	Y	Y	9
3M	14	Carveacre	FS	Chaparral	Existing	Hand Cut & Pile OR Masticate	Y	Y	Y	Y	155
3M	15	Carveacre	FS	Chaparral	Existing	Hand Cut & Pile	N	Y	Y	Y	28

Figure 1. Treatment unit locations – Anderson Truck Trail

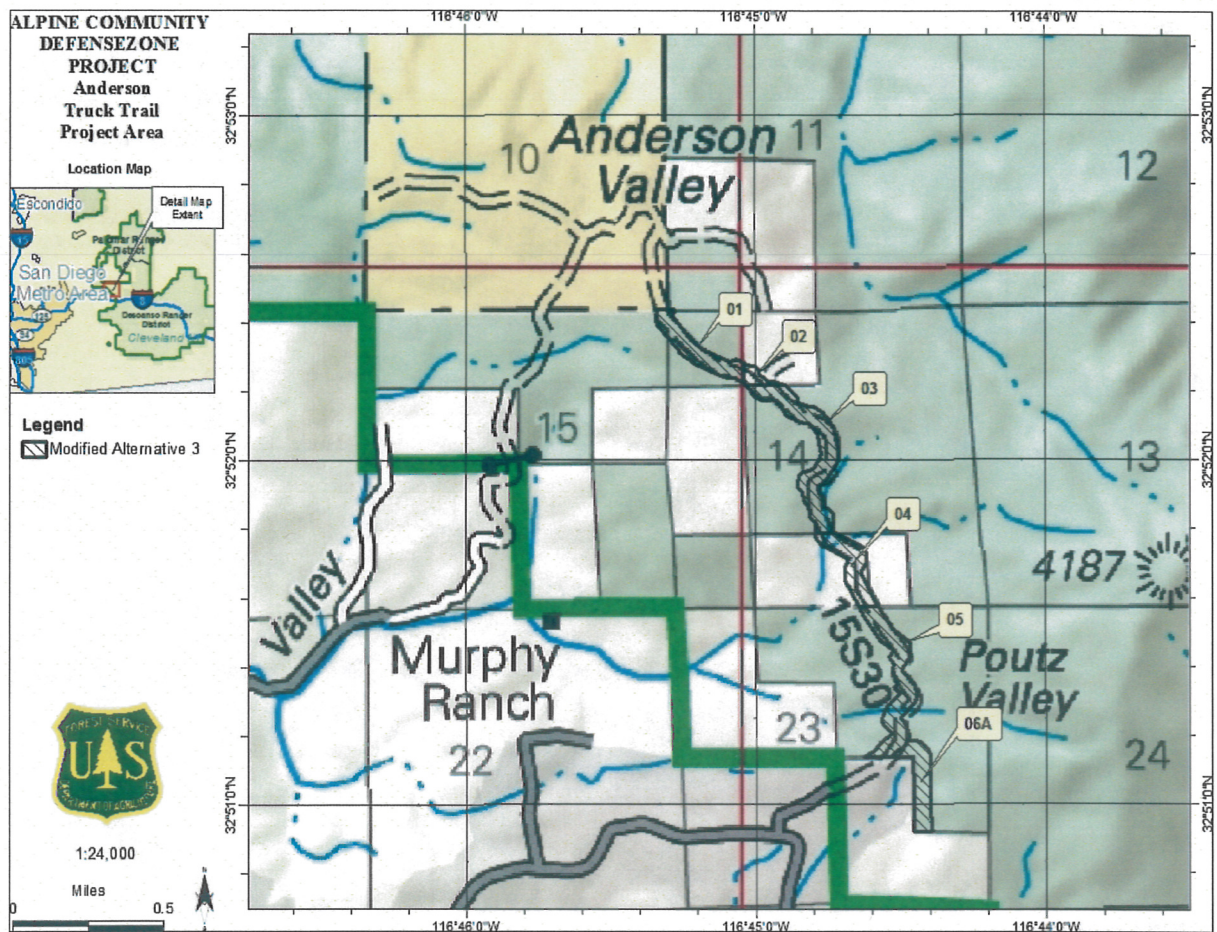


Figure 2. Treatment Unit Locations – Sweetwater

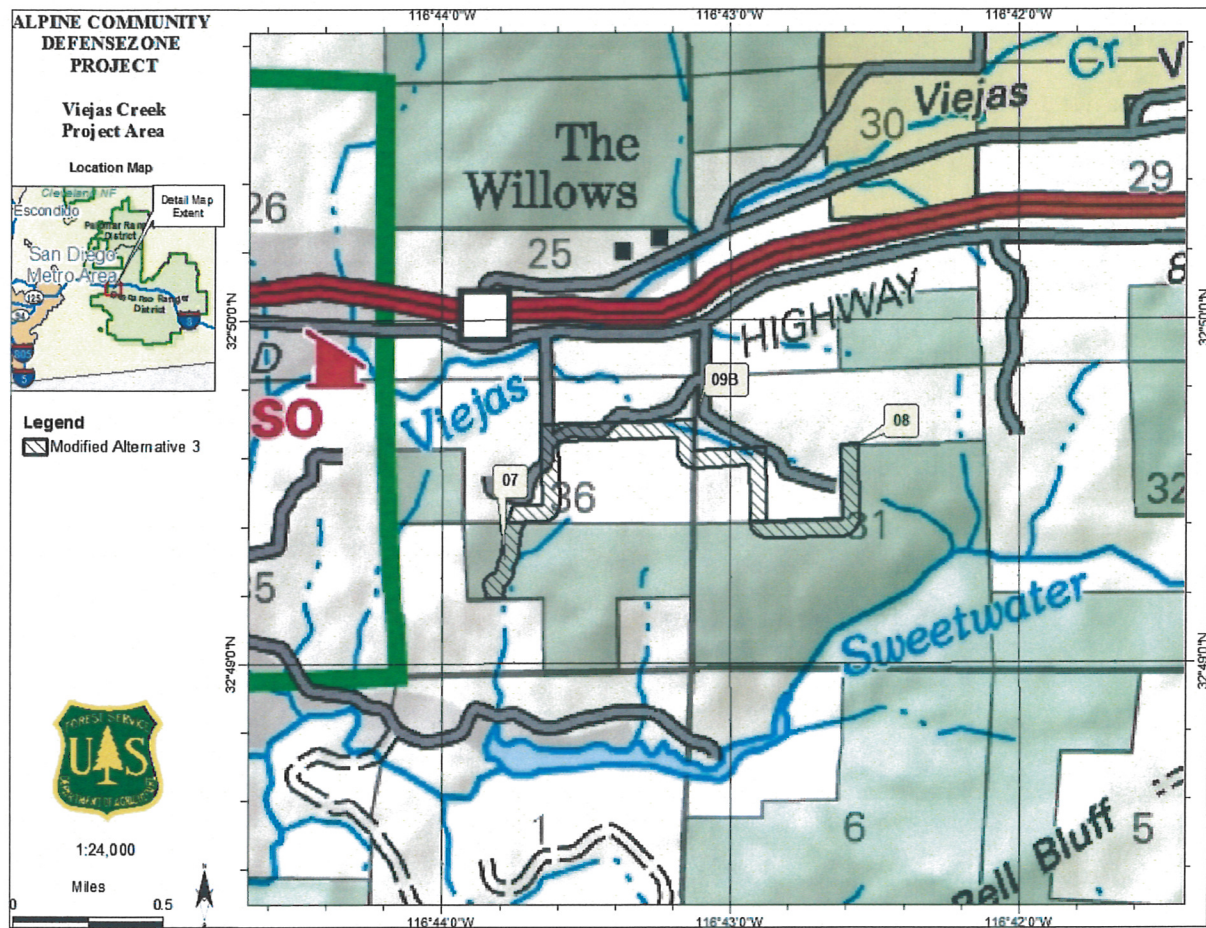
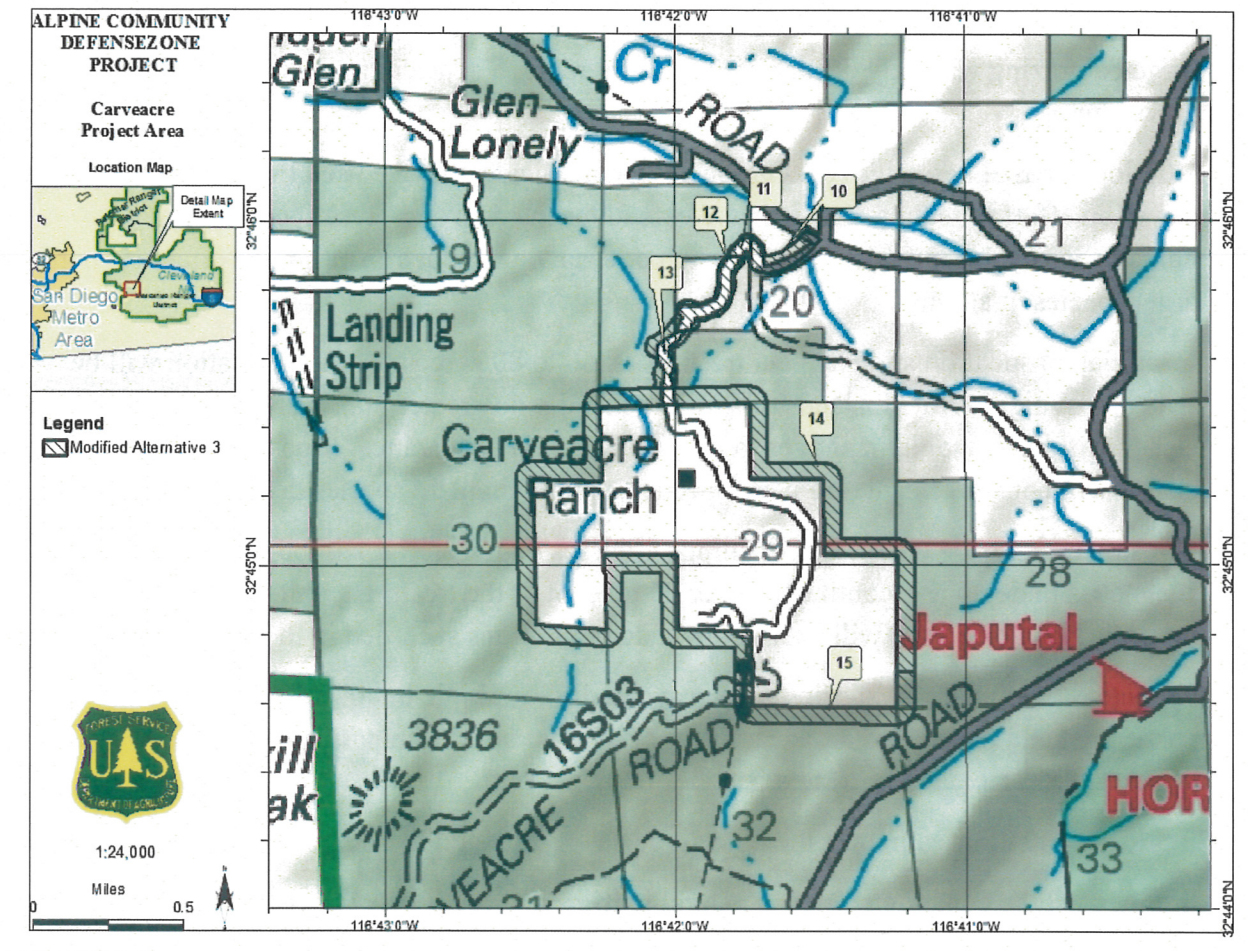


Figure 3. Treatment Unit Locations - Carveacre



Planned Activities within the Preferred Alternative:

- Initial entry into the mature chaparral vegetation will employ a combination of the following treatments: hand cutting, hand piling, and/or mastication using tracked or tired equipment, followed by prescribed fire through pile or broadcast burning. Masticator work will be completed with an excavator-mounted mastication attachment.
- Units will receive treatments not to exceed 300 feet wide.
- Mechanical treatments will generally occur on slopes up to 35 percent. Under unusual circumstances, short pitches of up to 50 percent slope could be mechanically treated (Forest Plan, S2).

- With the exception of scrub oak, no oaks will be intentionally cut unless they are a hazard tree.¹
- Targeted grazing will only occur on units 10 through 15 adjacent to the community of Carveacre.
- A triclopyr-based herbicide (ex. Garlon 3a), an herbicide, may be used throughout the project area in an effort to reduce regrowth and extend mechanical and prescribed burning maintenance cycles in future years. Design criteria are included to minimize effects to non-target species in all units.
- For initial mastication and hand cut treatments, 60 to 80 percent of the vegetation will be treated, leaving untreated islands of shrubs generally no greater than 0.25 acres in size. These islands will have undulating edges to provide a natural appearance. If possible, the retained islands will consist of differing plant species to maintain plant species diversity.
- If treatment units are masticated or chipped, the residual material will be generally three to five inches in depth and continuous over 25 percent of the treatment unit. A follow-up prescribed broadcast fire will occur only under conditions specified in the design features.
- Obligate reseeding shrub species will be avoided for multiple treatment methods (e.g., mastication and prescribed broadcast burning). These species in particular will be purposefully retained in untreated islands.
- In prescribed burn treatments, the objective will be to treat 60 to 80 percent of the vegetation.
- Firelines will be constructed where natural barriers and roads do not exist to provide control locations for prescribed fire activities and to allow access for ground-based ignition and holding crews. These lines will be constructed by hand. A full range of aerial and ground-based ignition equipment and firing patterns may be used to meet these objectives, but typically, ignition will be completed by hand (i.e., drip torches).
- Key areas of young coast live oaks will be avoided during mastication and prescribed burning.
- Proposed treatments will begin with initial treatments and be followed by maintenance to ensure effectiveness and sustainability of fuelbreak objectives. Various treatment methods will be implemented or withheld, based on the results and successes of achieving objectives. Monitoring and data collection will be used throughout all project phases to guide decisions for treatment implementation.

¹ A tree is considered hazardous (by the District's definition) if it has defects that may cause a failure resulting in property damage, personal injury or death. It must have a structural weakness and something to hit if it falls.

Initial Treatment:

- Hand cut and pile activity fuels or masticate the existing fuel bed.
- Pile burn or broadcast burn the activity fuels.
- A triclopyr-based herbicide will be applied to the young sprouting woody vegetation to limit regrowth. The herbicide will be mixed to label specifications for foliar applications with a modified seed oil surfactant and a marker dye. The herbicide formulation will be applied using backpack sprayers with a targeted application to re-sprouting perennial woody species that were cut or masticated. The application will occur during the mid- to late summer, the active growing season for perennial woody species, but after many desirable native annual plant species have completed their life cycle.

Maintenance Treatment:

- Maintenance with triclopyr could be introduced as soon as three years after initial application and may be reapplied at a three to five year interval to cut stumps and/or leaves of targeted species as warranted by regrowth in each unit.
- Maintenance with targeted grazing could be introduced two years after initial treatment and could be repeated every two years. Grazing will not follow herbicide application in the same season.
- Maintenance with hand cutting and piling of activity fuels or mastication followed by prescribed fire could begin three to five years after initial treatment and could be repeated every three to five years as warranted by regrowth in each unit.

These project design features will mitigate resource impacts during implementation of the Preferred Alternative:

2.4.1 General Wildlife

- WLD-1 Protect known active or inactive raptor nest areas from project activities. A no-disturbance buffer around active nest sites will be required from nest-site selection to fledging (Forest Plan S18). This buffer will vary by species but typically ranges from 100 to 300 feet.
- WLD-2 In Riparian Conservation Areas (RCA): Within the perennial streams' 328-foot buffer and intermittent streams' 100-foot buffer, no cutting/removal of riparian plant species (i.e., willow, coast live oak) will be allowed.

2.4.2 Terrestrial Wildlife Species***Migratory Birds***

- TWS-1 Avoid adverse impacts to nesting birds per Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), by avoiding treatment activities during bird breeding season (March 15 to September 15) whenever practicable. If work is performed during the breeding season and the Forest

biologist feels it is necessary, a walk through survey will be performed by a qualified biologist to identify obvious nests prior to undertaking work. If active nests are located, appropriate exclusionary buffers will be established.

2.4.3 Botany

Regional Forester's List of Sensitive Plant Species (Forest Service Sensitive)

- BOT-1 Areas with known sensitive species at Anderson Truck Trail, southwestern most leg of Carveacre fuelbreak, and northwestern corner of Carveacre fuelbreak will be excluded from grazing treatments; sites will be flagged for avoidance prior to unit treatments.
- BOT-2 Triclopyr will not be used within sensitive plant species occurrences. Known occurrences will be shown to workers on the ground and/or flagged by a Forest Service Representative prior to spraying.
- BOT-3 Where needed, brush barriers will be retained along roads to prevent off-highway vehicle (OHV) activity on the fuelbreaks. This will also help deter the spread of weeds into fuelbreak areas. Pipe rail barriers will be installed as needed to prevent OHV use of the fuel break; this is a known problem along Anderson Truck Trail.
- BOT-4 Isolated clumps of oaks and bigberry manzanita (*Arctostaphylos glauca*) within the project area will be excluded from treatments. These shrubs will not be masticated, and an area around them will be cleared to protect them from damage during prescribed burning.

2.4.4 Threatened, Endangered, and Candidate Species

- TES-1. Spiny Redberry (*Rhamnus crocea*) within the project area will be excluded from treatment to protect this host plant for Hermes Copper butterfly. This will include areas near Anderson Truck Trail, areas in the eastern part of the Viejas Creek fuelbreak, and an area in the southwestern corner of the Carveacre fuelbreak near the power line. See the specialist report for locations (USDA Forest Service 2016a).
- TES-2. The San Diego Thornmint population at Anderson Truck Trail will be avoided by constructing the fuelbreak such that it does not overlap with known and potential habitat for this species. There will be at least a 100-foot buffer between the occupied habitat and the fuelbreak, which will be marked with flagging prior to fuel break construction or maintenance.
- TES-3. Barriers will be installed to prevent OHV activity within the occupied San Diego Thornmint habitat, and the effectiveness of the barriers will be monitored at least twice per year.
- TES-4. Quino Checkerspot occupancy is assumed for all treated fuel break areas. For new

fuelbreaks (Anderson Truck Trail and Viejas Creek), the current condition of the area is dense chaparral which is not suitable habitat for Quino, so these areas will not be assumed occupied until after the initial fuels treatment. To protect Quino Checkerspot, fuels treatments and broadcast burning will occur in suitable Quino habitat between July 01 and February 28.

- TES-5. Fuel break maintenance activities will retain as much litter/ground cover as feasible to reduce the spread and abundance of non-native plant species.

2.4.5 Invasive Plant (Weed) Species

- WEED-1 All off-road equipment used will be washed before moving into the project area to ensure that the equipment is free of soil, seeds, vegetative material, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds of invasive plant species. "Off-road equipment" includes equipment, such as masticators and chippers; it does not include chip vans, service vehicles, water trucks, pickup trucks and similar vehicles not intended for off-road use. Equipment will be considered clean after six minutes of washing.
- WEED-2 A combination of natural barriers (e.g., rocks, logs, and vegetation), screening and fencing will be used, as required, to prevent/discourage illegal OHV activity and unauthorized recreation (i.e., user-created trail establishment) from occurring during and after the project treatment. Coordination with adjacent landowners, public education and signing will be used as appropriate.
- WEED-3 Staging areas for equipment, materials, or crews should be located in areas that have been previously disturbed or are degraded habitat. If treatment activities allow, mulched vegetation may be spread in staging areas after use to inhibit growth of non-native annual grasses.
- WEED-4 Before goats are brought in for targeted grazing within the project area, they should be held in quarantine, depending on the origin of the herd, until such time as any seeds from invasive species not already present in the project area will have passed through the intestinal tract of all animals in the herd.

2.4.6 Heritage

- HER-1 Identified cultural resources within the project area will be flagged for avoidance by a qualified archaeologist to include a buffer zone of approximately 10 meters around the outside of the boundary of each site. Potential ground disturbing activities prohibited within the buffer zone include use of masticators, targeted grazing, hand piling, and pile burning.
- HER-2 At the discretion of the Heritage Program Manager (HPM), certain hazardous fuels treatments may be authorized within site boundaries as long as appropriate on-site historic protection measures are applied.

- HER-3 Ground disturbing activities conducted in the vicinity of areas to be flagged and avoided may also be periodically monitored by a qualified archaeologist during project implementation in order to ensure there are no inadvertent effects to historic properties and to enhance the effectiveness of protection measures. The results of any monitoring inspections shall be documented in cultural resources reports and submitted to the HPM.
- HER-4 The Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians will be adequately notified prior to any implementation of proposed vegetation management activities in the Viejas Creek or Anderson Truck Trail portions of the proposed project area in order that they or their designated representative may conduct cultural resource monitoring of those activities at their discretion.

2.4.7 Watershed

- HYD-1 Areal extent of detrimental soil disturbance will not exceed 15 percent of the area dedicated to growing vegetation. Soil cover will be maintained at levels at least 50 percent of the soil surface in upland area and at least 71 percent in the Riparian Conservation Areas (RCA) (98 feet for intermittent streams and 50 feet for ephemeral streams). Soil cover will consist of rocks, litter, organic matter, low-growing plants, and woody debris. (FSH 2905.18; Veg-2)
- HYD-2 Mechanical equipment use (masticator) will require dry soil conditions during project implementation to prevent soil compaction, rutting, and disturbance. (Veg-2; Veg-8)
- HYD-3 Mechanical equipment operations will be limited to slopes less than 35% (Veg-2, Veg-8)
- HYD-4 No mechanical treatment is permitted within 98 feet of intermittent channels while mechanical equipment is permitted in ephemeral drainages. It is preferable that mechanical crossings of ephemeral drainages be limited and conducted perpendicular to the stream course. (Veg-3)
- HYD-5 Prescribed fire could be backed into the RCA. No broadcast burn ignitions will occur within RCAs. (Fire-2, Veg-3).
- HYD-6 Hand piles will not be placed in or within 98 feet of an intermittent channel and 50 feet of an ephemeral channel. (Fire-2, Veg-3)
- HYD-7 Hand piles will not exceed 15 percent of an area dedicated to growing vegetation. (FSH 2905.18; Fire-2)
- HYD-8 Firelines constructed for project implementation will be rehabilitated following project implementation (prescribed burn). Rehabilitation on the fireline includes: pulling back and spreading out berms, and spreading of bush and ground cover across the fireline. (Fire-2)

HYD-9 Water bars or lead out ditches may be constructed in firelines to minimize erosion. Water bars or lead out ditches will be installed according to the following recommended minimum intervals (Fire-2)

Table 1. Recommended minimum interval guidelines for the installation of waters bars.

Fireline Gradient <i>(% slope)</i>	Distance Between Water-Bars	
	<i>(feet)</i>	<i>(chains)</i>
0 to 5	no water-bars needed	no water-bars needed
6 to 15	200	3
16 to 30	100	1.5
31 to 49	75	1
> 50	50	0.5

HYD-10 Mechanical equipment refueling will occur outside of the RCA and will have spill containment measures in place during operations. For small quantities (5 gallons or less), fueling of gas-powered machinery will not occur within 25 feet of any body of water or stream channel to maintain water quality. (Road-10).

HYD-11 The Herbicide Transportation, Handling, and Emergency Spill Response Plan and spill kit will be on-site when herbicide treatment methods occur. The Plan will include reporting procedures, project safety planning, methods of clean-up of accidental spills, and information including a spill kit contents and location as noted in Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2150, Pesticide-Use Management and Coordination and Handbook (FSH) 2109.14, Pesticide-Use Management and Coordination Handbook. (Chem-1).

HYD-12 Herbicide containers must be secured and prevented from tipping during transport (Chem-5).

HYD-13 Equipment used for transportation, storage, or application of herbicides will be maintained in a leak-proof condition. (Chem-5).

HYD-14 To reduce the potential for spills, impervious material, such as a bucket or plastic, will be placed beneath mixing areas in such a manner as to contain any spills associated with mixing/refilling. (Chem-5).

HYD-15 Immediate control, containment, and cleanup of fluids and herbicides due to spills or equipment failure (broken hose, punctured tank, etc.) will be implemented. All

contaminated materials will be disposed of promptly and properly to prevent contamination of the site. All hazardous spills will be reported immediately to the Forest Hazardous Spill Coordinator. (Chem-5).

- HYD-16 Herbicide usage will be limited to the minimum amount required to be effective. (Chem-1; Chem-2; Chem-3).
- HYD-17 Unless prior approval is obtained from a Forest Service hydrologist or biologist; mixing and loading of herbicide(s) will take place a minimum of 150 feet from any body of water or stream channel. (Road-10; Chem-5).
- HYD-18 Herbicide spray equipment will not be washed or rinsed within 150 feet of any body of water or stream channel. All herbicide containers and rinse water will be disposed of in a manner that will not cause contamination of waters (Chem-5).
- HYD-19 No application of herbicides will occur within 10 feet of streams (Chem-3).

2.4.8 Herbicide

All herbicides will be used according to the design features listed below to minimize negative effects on soils, water, and non-target species.

- HERB-1 Herbicides will be applied using hand sprayers or backpack sprayers, potentially with daubing attachments. No aerial application of herbicides will occur. All herbicide application will adhere to all applicable Federal laws and laws of the State of California and San Diego County.
- HERB-2 The herbicide will be mixed to label specification with a modified seed oil (MSO) surfactant and marker dye.
- HERB-3 Herbicide applications on woody perennial species will occur in the mid- to late summer when plants are translocating nutrients from the leaves to the root systems. This increases the likelihood of initial success and will result in reduced need for follow up treatment. This season also avoids critical breeding seasons for many wildlife species and flowering seasons for many native plant species. In addition, this time of year is also a time of reduced stream flows and limits the accidental introduction of herbicides to surface waters.
- HERB-4 Where treatment areas occur adjacent to trails or other public use areas, short-term trail closures may occur.
- HERB-5 No foliar spray activities will be allowed if wind velocity is expected to exceed five miles per hour.
- HERB-6 No herbicide treatments will be allowed when rain is occurring or likely to take place within 48 hours.

HERB-7 Herbicides will not be applied directly to surface waters. Treatments will be timed to minimize the potential for introduction of herbicide to surface waters. When a target species occurs adjacent to surface waters care will be taken to prevent herbicide drift to surface waters, including trimming and folding of plants away from waters.

HERB-8 Work crews will be supervised to ensure that specific safety practices are followed. These practices include the use of appropriate protective clothing. Clean water and soap will be available for emergency washing.

HERB-9 Notification will be given to landowners bordering application area providing information about the nature and dates of applications.

HERB-10 At least a 100-foot buffer will be in place between occupied *Acanthomintha ilicifolia* habitat and areas where triclopyr is used, and at least a 10-foot buffer will be in place between redberry (*Rhamnus crocea*) shrubs and areas where triclopyr is used.

My decision to implement the Modified Alternative 3 considered existing conditions, meeting the purpose and need for the project, environmental effects and public comments. My conclusion is based on a review of the record that shows a thorough analysis using the best available science. I also considered direction provided in the Forest Plan, environmental laws (e.g., Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act), and related regulations and policies. Based on information in the EA and record, I believe Modified Alternative 3 best meets the purpose of and need for action while minimizing adverse effects to the environment.

The key considerations I used in making my decision include the alternative's ability to meet the purpose and need for the project:

- Without fuels treatments in the Greater Alpine Area, the potential for damage to occur during a wildland fire would be exacerbated since no areas of strategic vegetation reduction would be created. Additionally, emergency response personnel would find it difficult to implement fire management directions for direct control and perimeter control strategies during any normal or extreme fire weather/fuels conditions.
- Treatments proposed under Modified Alternative 3 will reduce fireline intensities and flame lengths on approximately 56% of the project area (219 acres) and in areas of previous fuels treatments (Carveacre), treatment efficacy would be prolonged through reoccurring maintenance (170 acres). Flame lengths will be less than 6 feet and fireline intensities would be reduced to 184 BTUs or less. This will grant firefighters easier access through escape routes to safety zones and tactical options such as burning out would become viable.
- Modified Alternative 3 will reduce risk to life and property adjacent to and near the project area. Post treatment conditions within the fuel break will allow for the use of safe, efficient fire suppression tactics and the better ability to engage in structure protection during a wildfire.

- The fuel bed modification that will take place under Modified Alternative 3 will also greatly increase the effectiveness of aircraft suppression equipment. Water and retardant dropped wouldn't have to penetrate a brush canopy to be effective, and the new fuel bed would react better to the drops.
- Modified Alternative 3 allows for an "All Lands" approach in creating defensible space, on National Forest System lands and Private lands, in the most strategic locations near infrastructure, improvements, and along roadways where firefighter access may be gained safely and efficiently.
- Modified Alternative 3 has incorporated numerous design features to minimize, or avoid completely, adverse impacts to biotic/abiotic resources within the project area.

The Alpine Community Defense Project Environmental Analysis documents the analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

3. Other Alternatives Considered

Alternative 1 is the "no action" alternative. No hazardous fuels reduction or vegetation maintenance activities will be implemented. Fuel loading, vegetation types, and current ecosystems will persist in their existing conditions. This alternative was considered in the decision but was not chosen. The "no action" alternative would not meet the needs for the project.

Alternative 2 was developed to create a continuous fuelbreak system restricted to National Forest System Lands only. Hazardous fuels reduction treatments were proposed on 361 acres of Cleveland National Forest Lands. Although analyzed in the EA, this alternative was not chosen as it would not have created defensible space in the most strategic location, close to infrastructure and improvements, using an "All Lands" approach.

Alternative 3, the Proposed Action, was developed to create a continuous fuel break across more favorable terrain and proximity to structures than Alternative 2, encompassing private land in addition to National Forest System lands. Treatments were proposed for 457 acres, with approximately 144 non-NFS acres and 313 Cleveland National Forest acres. Although analyzed by the EA, this alternative was not chosen and was subsequently revised into the Preferred Alternative to account for two challenges encountered during scoping.

First, the fuelbreak proposed to extend south of Anderson Truck Trail towards Interstate 8 presented multiple difficulties, including presence of several populations of endangered and sensitive species, overlap with the San Diego County Multiple Species Conservation Plan area, presence of biological conservation easements on the private parcels, potential need for a county clearing permit for this area, potential for a new fuel break to promote OHV activity, and conflict with LMP direction regarding fuel break construction associated with new or proposed developments.

Secondly, some private property owners refused to grant permission for fuels management treatments to occur on their lands.

4. Public Involvement

On October 8, 2014, a letter soliciting interest for a pre-planning field trip was mailed to 79 potentially interested or affected agencies, organizations, and persons, as well as representatives from thirteen Native American Tribes. On October 24, 2014, Forest Service representatives along with 5 attendees representing the Alpine Fire Safe Council, Viejas Fire Department, and Chaparral Lands Conservancy visited proposed project areas to discuss purpose, need, methods, locations, and extent of proposed treatments on the landscape.

This action was subsequently listed as a proposal on the Cleveland National Forest Schedule of Proposed Action (SOPA) in November 2014. No comments were received in response to the SOPA listing. A legal notice initiating a 30-day public scoping period was published in the San Diego Union Tribune on November 18, 2014. Additionally, a scoping letter containing a description and location of the proposed action was published online and sent to 81 potentially interested or affected agencies, organizations, and persons; including San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board, Cal Fire, US Department of Fish and Wildlife Service, local fire safe councils, The California Chaparral Institute, Sierra Club, and private land owners that intersected or shared boundaries with the project area. Five comment letters were received during public scoping.

Native American Tribal consultation was conducted in conjunction with the public scoping period. One non-federally recognized and twelve federally recognized tribes were scoped over the course of the 30-day period. One comment letter was received during tribal consultation.

A legal notice initiating a 30-day comment period was published in the San Diego Union Tribune on October 14, 2016. Additionally, comment letters were sent to 77 potentially interested or affected agencies, organizations, and persons, as well as, one non-federally recognized and twelve federally recognized tribes to inform interested parties of the available draft EA, request comment, and specify the timeline for response. Three comments were received during the public comment period.

5. Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental impacts described in the EA and after examining supporting documentation found in the project record, I find that implementing the selected alternative will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, considering the context and intensity of impacts (see 40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. The finding of no significant impact is not biased by the beneficial impacts of the selected alternative. The beneficial effects consist of the improved preparedness for future wildland fire events that will result from the project.
2. No significant impacts on public safety will occur due to the implementation of the project. The project will instead improve public safety in the event of a wildland fire as compared to existing conditions. Smoke could have adverse effects to human health and safety, but implementation will comply with the Air Pollution Control District's permissive burn days, minimizing adverse effects. The potential health effects of herbicide use are addressed in depth in the Alpine Community Defense EA (Chapter 3.2), which found no significant impacts to health or safety in using herbicide as specified in project design features.

3. No significant impacts on the unique characteristics of the area will occur because no effects to cultural resources are expected (Chapter 3.4) given the design features that will be followed, and no other unique characteristics apply.
4. The impacts on the quality of the natural environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the effects of the project.
5. The Forest Service has considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. Analysis shows the impacts are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts because the purpose and need for the project will be addressed by the selected alternative, including maintenance.
7. The cumulative impacts associated with the selected alternative are not significant (see relevant cumulative effects sections in Chapter 3 of the EA). This EA analyzed the cumulative effects of this project in combination with activities on adjacent lands.
8. The action will have no significant adverse impact on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects either listed or eligible to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or on Tribes. A heritage resource and tribal relations specialist has surveyed the project area and did not identify heritage resources that would be damaged or Tribes that would be adversely affected by the selected alternative (see section 3.4 of the EA).
9. The action will not have significant adverse effects on any endangered or threatened species, or habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. Project area surveys were conducted by a Forest Service wildlife biologist which identified three plant and animal species of concern: 1) One federally-listed plant species, San Diego Thornmint, occurs in the project area, as well as, 0.8 acres of critical Habitat. 2) Quino Checkerspot has suitable habitat in the project area. 3) One federal candidate species, Hermes Copper butterfly, occurs in the project area. Project activities are may affect and are likely to adversely affect each species and habitat, however, design features have been included avoid or mitigate impacts to these species and their habitat, which will avoid any significant adverse effects on these species (see section 3.3 of the EA).

A project specific Biological Opinion from US Fish and Wildlife Service was issued and is filed in the project record. It has concluded that the selected alternative is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of Quino or San Diego Thornmint and is not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat for San Diego Thornmint. Additionally, the selected alternative is not likely jeopardize the Hermes copper butterfly.
10. The action will not violate federal, state, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the LMP (see section 1.8 of the EA).

6. Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

My decision to implement the selected alternative is consistent with the long-term goals and objectives listed in the LMP. The project was designed in conformance with LMP standards and guidelines.

6.1 National Forest Management Act of 1976, as amended

All project activities fully comply with the LMP. This project incorporates all applicable LMP forest-wide standards, guidelines, and management area prescriptions, as they apply to the project area, and complies with LMP goals and objectives. All required interagency reviews and coordination have been accomplished and new or revised measures resulting from these reviews have been incorporated. The LMP complies with all resource integration and management requirements of 36 CFR 219.14 through 219.27. Application of LMP direction for the project ensures compliance at the project level. With the inclusion of LMP direction, this proposed project will move the existing condition of the project area toward its desired condition.

6.2 Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended

The project area was surveyed for threatened and endangered species. One federally-listed plant species, San Diego Thornmint, occurs in the project area. One federal candidate species, Hermes Copper butterfly, occurs in the project area. Project activities are designed to avoid or mitigate impacts to these species and their habitat, which will limit direct effects on these species (see section 3.3 of the EA). A Biological Opinion (B.O) from US Fish and Wildlife Service has been issued which concluded that the proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of San Diego Thornmint and is not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat for San Diego Thornmint. Additionally, the selected alternative is not likely jeopardize the Hermes copper butterfly.

6.3 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended

The action will have no significant adverse impact on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects either listed or eligible to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or on Tribes. The project has been analyzed by a heritage resource and tribal relations specialist in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and no historic properties or heritage resources that would be of concern to Tribes would be adversely affected by the selected alternative (see section 3.4 of the EA).

6.4 Federal Water Pollution Control Act (Clean Water Act) of 1972, as amended

The design of project activities is in accordance with LMP standards and guidelines, best management practices, and applicable Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction. Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of LMP standards and guidelines and Best Management Practices will occur. Project activities are expected to meet applicable state water quality standards (see section 3.5 of the EA).

6.5 Executive Order 11988, Clean Water

This project is fully consistent with this executive order.

6.6 Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species

Implementation of the selected alternative is not anticipated to cause or promote the introduction or spread of invasive species. The selected alternative is designed to reduce the potential introduction and spread of invasive species.

6.7 Executive Order 13186, Migratory Birds

Management objectives of this executive order will be met. Minimal effects on migratory bird species are expected through the inclusion of a timing restriction that was incorporated into the proposed action to avoid nesting disturbance. See section 2.4.2 and 3.3 of the EA.

7. Administrative Review or Objection Opportunities

This decision was subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218. A legal notice of the opportunity to object was published on December 12, 2016 in *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. This initiated the 45 calendar day objection period which ended, Thursday January 26, 2017. Additionally, all parties who held standing due to submission of comments in prior comment periods were notified via email of the objection period timeline and issuance of a Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact, posted on-line for review. No objections were received.

8. Implementation Date

In accordance with 36 CFR 218, as no objections were received within the legal objection period, this decision may be signed and implemented on, but not before, the fifth business day following the close of the objection-filing period.

9. Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service objection process, contact:

Rick Marinelli, Battalion Chief
Descanso Ranger District
3348 Alpine Boulevard
Alpine, CA 91901
Phone: (619) 445-6235



ROBERT T. HEIAR
District Ranger

02/01/2017
Date

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